

*Abravanel*COMMENTARY ON
THE BIBLE*Translated by Robert Sacks*

Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) was born in Lisbon of a family that for generations had enjoyed political and social prominence in Spain and Portugal. Abravanel received both a traditional Jewish and a humanistic education; he also studied and drew upon the work of Christian exegetes. Early in life, he entered into the service of King Alfonso V of Portugal as treasurer. Alfonso's trust and admiration for him lasted until that monarch's death in 1481. The new king, John II, was not so well disposed toward him. Finding himself accused of collaboration with the Duke of Braganca, Abravanel escaped to Castile under threat of execution. The banished Abravanel, all his possessions confiscated, then began his great commentaries on the Bible. Soon, however, he managed to find himself back in the sphere of practical politics—first in Spain, then in Italy. When the

Jews were forced to leave Spain in 1492, he moved to Naples, but it was not long before that city was taken by the French. He was again forced south; after holding several other positions, he was employed by the Venetian republic to conclude a commercial treaty with his native land of Portugal. He died in Venice and was buried at Padua. In addition to his extensive exegetic writings (covering all of the Bible except for the Hagiographa), Abravanel produced a number of messianological and apologetic works, as well as a commentary on Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.

The following brief selections are intended to give the reader some notion of Abravanel's political teaching and of the foundations on which it rests. At bottom, there is a general concept of nature (explicit in the discussion of the origin of the arts, but implicit in other passages as well)

that serves as a measure of Abravanel's dissatisfaction with the classical view of politics. A persistent theme running through these selections is: what kind of political life did his Creator intend man to lead? In attempting to answer this question by way of determining how the ancient Jews were governed, Abravanel reaches a position markedly closer to Aquinas than to Maimonides' teaching. Abravanel is practically unique among medieval Jewish commentators in denying that the Bible positively commanded the Jews to establish a monarchy. His denial of that institution's necessity appears to be, however, less an expression of humanistic republicanism than a part of his broader disparagement of political life as such. He preserves the monarchical principle to the extent that he sees human organization culminating in a single head. But that head is a prophetic like Moses—a man so preoccupied with divine matters that he must

be instructed by a Gentile in matters pertaining to the administration of justice. Such "low things" are no concern of the prophet. Accordingly, the transpolitical prophet is not to be understood within the confines of political philosophy.

Abravanel's commentaries on the Bible were held in particularly high regard by Christian scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While more than thirty Latin editions have been published, the following selections are believed to be translated here for the first time in a modern language. There is no critical edition of the Hebrew text of Abravanel's commentaries. The following passages may be found in his *Commentary on the Pentateuch* (Hanau, 1710), and in his *Commentary on the Prior Prophets* (Frankfurt, 1736). The italic numbers in brackets in the body of the translation refer to page and column in these editions.

COMMENTARY ON

THE PENTATEUCH

And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another: "Come, let us make brick and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said: "Come, let us build us a town, and a tower, with its top in heaven, and let us make us a name; lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." And the Lord came down to see the town and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said: "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is what they begin to do; and now nothing will be withholden from them, which they purpose to do. Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand

one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth; and they left off to build the town. Therefore was the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth; and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth [Gen. 11:1-9].

[41a1] I say that according to me it is more proper and fitting to say regarding the sin of the generation of the Tower of Babel and their transgression, that they stumbled and sinned in the same way that our First Father and his son Cain sinned, and his seed as well. Now man¹ was created by the Holy One (blessed be He) in His image, possessing an intellecting soul, so that he might perfect his soul by cognizing his Creator and knowing His actions. Before him were placed all the things that were necessary for the maintenance of his life—food and drink, like the fruits of the trees of the Garden [of Eden] and the waters of its rivers. All this existed by nature, without any need at all for human art, so that he did not have to busy himself with seeking them—except for divine knowledge, since it was for this that he was created. Man sinned in that he was not satisfied with the natural things that He had placed before him, but was attracted to the things of the appetite and the generally accepted actions. Because of his sin, he was driven out of the Garden of Eden, place of rest, toward the East, filled with disgrace; and the ground was cursed on his account. The natural things did not satisfy him, and since he chose what was superfluous, he found it necessary to do hard work, as the Master wrote. Cain also chose to engage in artful things and therefore became a tiller of the ground. All day he ploughed the thicket in order to plant, broke and harrowed his ground. But his intellect [41a2] gave way to his bestial part and served it. Therefore he was a tiller of the ground. Abel, on the other hand, who became a shepherd, was attracted to the natural things and satisfied himself with them; for there is neither work nor art in shepherding a flock, apart from governing them according to the way of nature. Hence all the Holy Fathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and the tribes and Moses and David our Fathers were shepherds; they were not tillers of the ground. And Noah too, though he sinned in his being attracted to wine, is not called “a tiller of the ground” by Scripture, but rather *a man of the ground* [Gen. 9:20]—that is to say, a lord and ruler over it. But Cain, because his intellect had given way to his bestial part [by engaging] in the arts, was called *a tiller of the ground* [Gen. 4:2]. Thus he built a town and called its name Enoch,² because he educated and instructed his sons in practicing the arts that are related to the building³ of a town and the founding of a city. Similarly all the sons of Cain took up the work of their fathers and were attracted to the superfluous arts. So Jubal was *the father of all such as handle the harp and pipe*. And Tubal-cain was the father of all such as *forge brass and iron*. And Jabal, too, in making an effort to purchase sheep, mixed art with the work of

God, something that had not previously been done. Thus it is said of him that he was *the father of all such as dwell in tents and have cattle* [cf. Gen. 4:20–22]. All the sons of Cain pursued the superfluous things; violence and destruction increased among their people until they were punished on account of it in the days of the Flood and were wiped off the earth.

Similarly, the sins of the generation of the Tower of Babel were like the sin of Adam and Cain and his sons since, having a multiplicity of the natural things necessary for their existence, by God from heaven, freed of [any need for] art and all labor, and prepared to busy themselves with the perfection of their souls, [nevertheless] their thoughts were not set at rest by the great natural gift that their Creator had prepared for them. Rather they sought and put all their thoughts to finding the arts by which a town might be built, one comprehending all the arts and having a tower in its midst, in order to come together there and to make themselves political instead of being rustics. For they thought that the end particular to them was the political association, so that joining and company might arise among them; and that this was the highest of the human ends, together with the things that would follow from it: namely, fame, office, rulership, imaginary honors, the delight of gathering possessions, and the violence and robbery and bloodshed that follow—none of which was to be found while they were in the fields, each one by himself. As Solomon said: *God made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions* [Eccles. 7:29]. All of this unnatural superfluity hinders and frustrates man in attaining his true perfection of the soul. Thus these sinning people were punished in their souls in that He confounded their language and scattered them over the face of the entire earth—just as He had driven the first man out of the Garden of Eden, and had driven Cain out of the land in which he dwelt, and had driven his sons out of the world by means of the waters of the Flood—for their sin was the same in so far as they placed the Tree of Knowledge as their final end and abandoned the Tree of Life, which is the true end. Thus it was fitting that their punishment too be alike.

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[41b1] You ought not to say: “If these superfluous arts and the association into a city or town were evil in the eyes of the Lord, why was it that He did not forbid them to Israel afterwards?” For the answer to this is clear. When He (blessed be He) saw that Adam and all his progeny had already sunk into an appetite for the superfluous arts and were drowned in them, He did not forbid them to His people; for He watched and saw that they could not be removed from him *inasmuch as he is also flesh* [Gen. 6:3]. However, He admonished⁴ the Children of Israel to conduct themselves in those artful things justly and in a becom-

ing manner, not disgracefully. This is like the matter of having a king, which was loathsome in His eyes; but when He saw that they were going to choose one in any case, He commanded that the choice be made by His prophets, and that it be made from among their brethren, and several other commandments that stem from the matter of having a king, as will become clear in its place. Indeed, you see that in all the days during which the Children of Israel were traveling in the desert, under divine governance, He (blessed be He) never satisfied their need with anything other than natural divine things—from the manna, the quails, and the well, even to clothing and shoes and clouds of glory⁵—but never with anything of art. As it is written: *Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell* [Deut. 8:4]. But when they had come into an inhabited land, He left them to their nature in all the uses of their generally accepted arts.

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The human arts are arranged in accordance with nature in three ways. (1) Some of them help nature to do its work—like tilling the ground and the art of medicine and the like. Of these it is said that they used to say, “Let us arise and dwell in heaven”;⁶ that is to say, they would take part in the heavenly causes, which are the natural agents, and help them and be like them by means of their arts. Of these it is said: *And from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad* [Gen. 11:9]; for, by His will, the things of nature are sufficient unto themselves and have no need of the help of art, as was the case at the beginning of the Creation. (2) There are arts that differ from, and are alien to, nature, for they make things in which nature plays no role—like most of the productive arts, such as the making of clothing, house-building, shipmaking, and others. Concerning this sect of those possessing sciences alien to nature, the sage says that they used to say, “Let us go up into heaven and perform worship of idols.”⁶ For just as the heavens perform natural acts upon this matter, so they would perform acts alien [to the acts of heaven] without following them [that is, without using the same means as heaven]. Of these it is said: *Because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth* [Gen. 11:9]; for it was because of these alien arts that they had need of alien words and alien terms, and that was the confounding of their language, as I have explained. (3) The third way of the arts is opposed to and against nature—like throwing a stone upward or causing fire to go downward. Also like this, among men, is the attempt of some to domineer over others and to subjugate some to others, though nature has made men free and equal at their birth. Concerning this sect [it is said that] they used to say, “Let us arise and make war upon heaven”;⁶ that is to say, their arts were opposed to, and made war upon, the natural custom.

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[42a2] Now in the early days, until the Generation of the Flood, the whole of mankind were influenced and overseen by Him (blessed be He) in all their affairs, without any intermediary either for good or for evil. Therefore there could always be found among them wise men who had understanding of the true divine science, like Adam and Seth and Eber and Methuselah, Lemach, Noah, and their like. Among them there was to be found pure natural custom without any quest for the superfluities and the imaginary arts. And withal, they had a single language, that which the Holy One (blessed be He) had taught to the first man. However, in departing from the Ancient of Days and leaving natural custom to pursue the arts, which hinder perfection, in the building of the town and the tower, *the Lord came down to see* [Gen. 11:5] their doings, for up until then He had truly been their overseer. He said: "Since these [men] were not satisfied with being one people having one language, and have begun to do the works of the imaginary arts, *I will hide My face from them* [Deut. 32:20] and from their governance, and I shall commit them to the princes on high [that is, the angels]." Thus His saying to these princes, *Come, let us go down* [Gen. 11:7]; that is to say, "Come with Me to oversee the nations of the human species, for each one of us shall oversee a single nation. And just as My divine providence has been removed from them, so shall the divine holy language be wrested from them in such a manner that they will be divided into fragmented and conventional languages, each of them related and particular to the governance of the princes on high," just as the holy language is particular to His governance (blessed be He).

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And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood about Moses from the morning unto the evening. And when Moses' father-in-law [Jethro] saw all that he did to the people, he said: "What is this thing that thou doest to the people? Why sittest thou thyself alone, and all the people stand about thee from morning unto even?" And Moses said unto his father-in-law: "Because the people come unto me to inquire of God; when they have a matter it cometh unto me; and I judge between a man and his neighbor, and I make them know the statutes of God, and His Laws." And Moses' father-in-law said unto him: "The thing that thou doest is not good. Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou, and this people that is with thee; for the thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone. Harken now unto my voice, I will give thee counsel, and God be with thee: be thou for the people before God, and bring thou the causes unto God. And thou shalt teach them the statutes and the Laws, and shalt show them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do. Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of

truth, hating unjust gain; and place such over them to be captains of thousands, captains of hundreds, captains of fifties, and captains of tens. And let them judge the people at all seasons; and it shall be, that every great matter they shall bring unto thee, but every small matter they shall judge themselves; so shall they make it easier for thee and bear the burden with thee. If thou shalt do this thing, and God command thee so, then thou shalt be able to endure, and all this people also shall go to their place in peace." So Moses hearkened to the voice of his father-in-law, and did all that he had said. And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, captains of thousands, captains of hundreds, captains of fifties, and captains of tens. And they judged the people at all seasons: the hard causes they brought unto Moses, but every small matter they judged themselves. And Moses let his father-in-law depart; and he went his way into his own land [Exod. 18:13-27].

[134a2] Concerning the multitude of judges that Jethro advised and that Moses appointed—captains of thousands and captains of hundreds, captains of fifties and captains of tens—their number being over 71,600, as the sages (may their memory be a blessing) have mentioned. Rabbi Abraham ben Ezra [applied the verse:] *For the transgression of a land many are the captains thereof* [Prov. 28:2]. There is no doubt that this is a hard and shocking thing. For his understanding was that the captains of thousands were captains who had a thousand men in their houses serving them. And similarly, the captains of hundreds were those each one of whom had a hundred men in his house serving him, and similarly for the rest. But to me that is a worthless opinion because the Israelites in Egypt were not dukes or kings that any of them might have a thousand servants, or even a hundred. Even in the case of Moses, the Scripture only mentions that he had one servant: *And his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man* [Exod. 33:11]. How could it be that any one of a people who only yesterday were humbled before mortar and bricks should have a thousand servants, or a hundred or fifty or even ten? If all of the congregation were holy, and He was in their midst, why should some of them be slaves and hirelings to others, and why should these be in subjugation to the others? If it was to find food for his life, each one could partake of the manna, *each man according to his eating* [Exod. 16:16]. And even the verse, *For the transgression of a land many are the captains thereof* [Prov. 28:2], indicates rather that they are all on one level, not that some of them are captains humbling others.

As for the captains, with each increase in their number, the governance of the people is better arranged; provided only that they are ordered one under another, all culminating in a single head, as Abū Naṣr [Alfarabi] has made clear in the *Principles of Beings*.⁷ This analogy may be found in the organs of a man and in the relation that the beings have to one another within the order of the world until one reaches the First Cause

(blessed be He). What stands in the way of the same occurring in this matter, that is, the captains of tens under the captains of fifties, and the latter under the captains of hundreds, and the latter under the captains of thousands? It is possible to interpret it as meaning that, because Israel's camp was great and numerous, Jethro's advice was that Moses should appoint leaders and judges. And, in order that everyone should be subject to them, he gave to each captain of those leaders, men under his control to serve him, that they might follow him as the need arises, to go out in the army, or to move camp, or to castigate and punish those who were judged.⁸ Among those leaders was one whose rank was so high that he had a thousand men who would preserve his headship and give heed to his bidding. And for such as was not so elevated there were a hundred men, and for another fifty, and thus for each of the others according to his rank and perfection. But those leaders [134b1] were few, and they would judge the people at all times. What is correct in my eyes is that with regard to the matter of judgment and the matter of wars—which are the most comprehensive things affecting the people—Jethro, in his wisdom, and Moses our lord too, saw that each time an appointment became more encompassing, it became less ordered. Therefore they did not assign captains over tens of thousands or over hundreds of thousands or the like, since surrounding oneself with great numbers of men would confuse governance. It is sufficient that the most general appointment should be over one thousand men. For with regard to the matter of judgment, it is sufficient that one man judge a thousand individuals. (In the case of wars it is even clearer that only rarely can a single man of might be found who is able to lead and order a thousand men so that they would go and come in a proper fashion.) However the captains who are under them—that is, captains of hundreds and captains of fifties and captains of tens—are needed in addition to the captains of thousands with regard to the matter of judgment. They differ in their governance and appointment in three ways. The first way is that they [the judges] will differ in regard to kind and [type of] governance. For some of them will judge cases of criminal law, and some cases of civil law. And of these, in each tribe some will judge matters of real estate, and others matters of goods, and such various things, in such a way that it is necessary that there be many judges.

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When thou art come unto the land that the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein; and shalt say: "I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are round about me"; thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose; one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee; thou mayest not put a foreigner over thee, who is not thy brother. Only he shall not

multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses; forasmuch as the Lord hath said unto you: "Ye shall henceforth return no more that way." Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away; neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold. And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this Law in a book, out of that which is before the priests the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life; that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this Law and these statutes, to do them; that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left; to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children, in the midst of Israel [Deut. 17:14-20].

[295b2] Even though it be admitted that the existence of a king is useful and necessary for a people to improve the political association and maintain it—a proposition that is contrary to the truth—it is not so for the people of Israel, because for them it is neither needful nor necessary. The explanation of this is that the need that a people has for kings can be grouped under three headings. The first concerns the subject of wars, [namely,] saving the people from their enemies and fighting for their land. The second is to order the nomoi and set down the Laws that are necessary for maintaining them. The third is to administer extralegal stripes and punishments occasionally, according to the need of the hour, as is proper to the absolute divine power that he has.

But the nation of Israel has no need for any of these three things. This is not [necessary] as regards wars and saving them from their enemies, because Israel is saved by the Lord, and it is He who fights for them. As it is written: *Happy art thou, O Israel, who is like unto thee? A people saved by the Lord, the shield of thy help, and who is the sword of thy excellency! And thine enemies shall dwindle away before thee; and thou shalt tread upon their high places [Deut. 33:29].* Also, this Judge would go out and come before them in wars, as we found in the cases of Joshua and Gideon and Samuel and the rest of the judges. Nor did they have need for a king to establish Laws and nomoi, for *Moses commanded us a Law, and so on [Deut. 33:4].* And He (blessed be He) commanded: *Ye shall not add unto the word, and so on [Deut. 4:2]. Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the Lord my God has commanded me [Deut. 4:5]. And what great nation is there that hath God so nigh, and so on [cf. Deut. 4:7]. And what great nation is there that hath statutes and judgments so righteous, and so on [Deut. 4:8].* And the king of Israel did not have it in his power to innovate anything in the Law, or to subtract from it—as it is written of him: *And that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left [Deut. 17:20].* Nor was a king necessary in Israel to administer stripes and punishments

occasionally, according to the need of the hour, for the Holy One (blessed be He) delegated that to the Great Court of Law—that is, the Sanhedrin—as I have explained in commenting [on Deut. 17:8]. And aside from that, He (blessed be He) announced to us that if a judge, relying upon a righteously-ordered judgment, should declare a wicked man to be innocent, He (blessed be He) would punish the evil-doer by His great law, as it is written: *Keep thee far from a false matter; and the innocent and righteous slay thou not; for I will not justify the wicked* [Exod. 23:7]. That is, whatever you are not able to punish by the law, I Myself will punish it.

Thus it has been made clear that these three matters—saving [the people in times of] war, setting down the Law and the commandments, and [the administration of] occasional extralegal punishments and stripes—are all done by Him (blessed be He) for His people. Thus He (blessed be He) was their king, and there was nothing whatever for which they needed a king of flesh and blood. This matter had already been written in the Law, and was repeated in the Prophets, and was repeated yet again in the Hagiographa.⁹ For Moses our Master (peace be upon him) said: *The Lord shall reign for ever and ever. For the horses of Pharaoh went [in with his chariots and with his horsemen into the sea,] and so on* [Exod. 15:18–19]. That is, the Holy One (blessed be He) waged war upon [296a1] the sea for Israel against Egypt and caused their enemies to be drowned. Thus, He *shall reign for ever and ever*, and they have no need for any other king. In the Prophets, Isaiah said: *For the Lord is our Judge, the Lord is our Legislator, the Lord is our King and He will save us* [cf. Isa. 33:22]. In this passage he alludes to the three reasons for which a king is made. With regard to the judgment made according to the need of the hour, he says: *The Lord is our Judge*. And with regard to the ordering of statutes and nomoi, all of which are called “statute,” he says: *The Lord is our Legislator*; that is, He orders statutes for us. Concerning wars, he says: *The Lord is our King and He will save us*. In the Hagiographa it is said: *Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; that the King of glory shall come in. Who is the King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle* [Ps. 24:7–8]. That is, it is not proper to call a corporeal man “King of glory,” but only Him (blessed be He) for it is He who is strong and mighty in battle, waging war for His people.

Thus it is clear from all this that although it be admitted that a king is necessary for the [other] nations, that does not justify it for the Israelite nation, especially since experience has already shown of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah that *they are of them that rebel against the light* [Job 24:13]. They turned the hearts of the Children of Israel backward—as you know in the case of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, and all the rest of the kings of Israel and most of the kings of Judah—so that on account

of them, *Judah is gone into exile because of affliction, and because of great idolatry*.¹⁰ We do not see this among the judges of Israel or their prophets. All of them were god-fearing men of valor, and men of truth. Not one of the prophets turned his heart from the Lord to worship other gods, in contradistinction to the kings, which of whom was saved from idolatry? All of this testifies to the fact that the governance of the judges was good, but that the governance of the kings was bad, harmful, and very dangerous.

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Now hear the interpretation of the portion [of the Scripture] concerning the king, and the commandment as it is in truth! It says: *When thou art come unto the land that the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein; and shalt say: I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are round about me* [Deut. 17:14]. This is by no means a commandment, for He (blessed be He) did not command them to say that and to ask for a king. It is only a statement regarding the future, telling what will be said after you will already have been in the chosen land, after the conquests and all the wars are over, and after the partition [of the conquered territory among the people has been completed]. That is what it means when it says: *Thou shalt possess it and shalt dwell therein*. I Myself know that you shall be ungrateful when, of yourselves, you shall say, *I will set a king over me*, not from the necessity of having to wage war against the nations [inhabiting Canaan] or of conquering the land—for it has already been conquered before you—but only to make yourselves like the other nations that set kings over themselves. This is somewhat foolish, because you should have asked for a king upon first entering the land, in order to wage your wars, since that was the time when he was most properly needed, not after the conquest and the partition and when you have been dwelling securely alone in the land. This is why it says: *And thou shalt say: I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are round about me*; that is, not by necessity, nor from any need, but only that you might act according to the deeds of the [other] nations. It mentions that when this shall happen, they shall not cause that king to reign whom they wish, but rather that one whom the Lord shall choose from among their brethren. This is the essence of the commandment and its true import: *Then thou shalt set him king over thee . . . from among thy brethren* [Deut. 17:15].¹¹ Not that they are commanded to ask for one, but only that when they should ask for one out of their own wish, they should not choose him by themselves, but rather that one whom the Lord shall choose from among their brethren. Accordingly, the matter of having a king was a positive commandment stemming from a permission—as if to say, when you wish to do it, even though it is not proper, thou shalt do it in no other way than this.

COMMENTARY ON
THE PRIOR PROPHETS

Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah. And they said unto him: "Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways; now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said: "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed unto the Lord. And the Lord said unto Samuel: "Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee; for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected Me, that I should not be king over them" [I Sam. 8:4-7].

[92a2] I myself *in my straits have prepared* [I Chron. 22:14] three speeches that consolidate the truth of this homiletic discourse. The first speech is to investigate whether a king is necessary for the political association. The second speech—[accepting for the moment] the argument that it is necessary—is whether a king is necessary for the people of Israel as it is for the rest of the nations. The third speech is an interpretation of the portion [of the Scripture] concerning the king, and an understanding of the commandment and its truth. Now I think that all this confusion, which I have noted, befell the above-mentioned sages¹² *because, even because* [Ezek. 13:10] they did not plumb the truth of the commandment and its root (*shoresh*). All of them accepted the notion that there was a positive commandment laid upon Israel to ask for a king. But I am not of this opinion. After presenting these three speeches by way of preface, I shall resolve the above-mentioned question in accord with what I think.

The first speech maintains that we ought to know first whether the existence of a king among a people is a necessary thing, required in itself, and without which nothing is possible. Those who have investigated it (Aristotle and his companions),¹³ think that this is so, and that the relation of the king to the political association is like the relation of the heart to the body of an animal possessing a heart, and like the relation of what is to the First Cause (blessed be He). They believe that kingship entails three things: the first is unity and the absence of partnership; the second is continuity and the absence of change; the third is absolute power. But in truth, their thought concerning the obligation to have a king and his necessity is false, since it is not destructive that a people have many leaders who come together and unite and agree on a single plan, and that governance and judgment be according to their decision. Why should their governance not be temporary, changing from year to year, more or less? When the term comes for other judges and officers, they would take

their place and look to see whether the preceding ones had transgressed in exercising their art. Whatever their wrongdoing, God would set aright any wrongdoing they had committed. And why could their power not be limited and ordered in accord with the Laws and judgments? The law is that [if there is a dispute between] an individual and a majority, the rule goes according to the majority. It is more likely that an individual man would transgress and sin in the office of king (either through his stupidity or his lust or his anger—as it is said: *The wrath of a king is as messengers of death*¹⁴ [Prov. 16:14]), [92b1] than that a large number of men would sin *while they took counsel together against him* [cf. Ps. 31:14]. For if any one of them should sin, his companions would restrain him from doing so. And since judgment is due to be given shortly, the terror of flesh and blood will be upon them, and *they shall come trembling unto the Lord and to His goodness* [Hos. 3:5], and to the punishment of the judges succeeding them who will punish them, *and their wickedness shall be revealed before the congregation* [cf. Prov. 26:26]. The divine one (Aristotle),¹⁵ says in the beginning of the *Metaphysics* that the truth is easy when considered in relation to the knowledge that many men have and the attainment thereof by all of them together, but very hard for the individual by himself.¹⁶ This shows that ignorance is more apt to be found in an individual, while understanding together with the comprehension of the truth are more apt to be found among the many. With the power of those who understand being limited, they will not expose themselves by doing what is not proper.

What reasonable arguments do we have to bring to bear upon this point? The wise one (Aristotle),¹⁵ has already taught us that experience prevails over the syllogism. *Behold, and see* [Lam. 1:12] the lands whose governance has been in the hands of kings. You will see their abominations and their idols; each of them *does what is right in his own eyes* [cf. Judg. 17:6], and *the land is filled with violence because of them* [cf. Gen. 6:13], *and who may say unto him [the king], What doest thou?* [Eccles. 8:4].

Today we see many lands whose governance is in the hands of judges and temporary rulers chosen from among them every three months, and *a king against whom there is no rising up* [cf. Prov. 30:31]. *Let us choose for them a judgment* [cf. Job 34:4] of a defined order, and they shall have dominion over the people as they practice the art of war; *not a man shall stand against them* [cf. Josh. 21:42], *whether it be for correction, or for their land, or for mercy* [cf. Job 37:13]. But if any one of them should sin in some matter, he would receive his fitting punishment from those who are soon to replace them, and in such a way that no one would presume to do so again. *Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard* [Isa. 40:28] that *the fourth dreadful beast* [Dan. 7:7], wicked Rome, ruled the entire world *and devoured the whole earth and trod it down and*

broke it in pieces [cf. Dan. 7:23]? While her governance was in the hands of consuls, *they were in full strength, and likewise many* [Nah. 1:12], but after Caesar attained sole power, *she became tributary* [Lam. 1:1]. And even today the government of Venice is a mistress *that is great among the nations, and princess among the provinces* [Lam. 1:1]; and the government of Florence *is the beauty of all lands* [Ezek. 20:6]; and the government of Genoa *is dreadful and strong* [cf. Dan. 7:7]. But Lucca, Siena, and Bologna and the other lands that are without a king, but are governed by leaders who are chosen for a limited time, are, as I have mentioned, just governments *in which there is nothing perverse or crooked* [Prov. 8:8], where *no man lifts up his hand or his foot* [Gen. 41:44] *for every matter of trespass* [Exod. 22:8]. They conquer lands that are not their own by wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. All of this shows that the existence of a king is neither necessary nor obligatory for a people. Rather, it is very harmful and involves tremendous danger—both to his people and to his servants—for him to have in his hand the power to annihilate, kill, and destroy according to his whim.

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[93a1] The third speech is an interpretation of the portion [of Scripture] concerning the king that occurs in the Law, and the understanding of the truth of the commandment.

I say that the Scripture relates, according to my opinion, that in the latter days—after Israel will have been in the land, have inherited it, and, by God's compassion for them, have dwelt therein—without any need, ungratefully they shall request permission to set a king over themselves, not out of necessity, but only in order to make themselves like the other nations that set kings over themselves. Thus it is written: *When thou art come unto the land that the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein* [Deut. 17:14]. That is to say, out of foolishness you will not ask for a king at a time when wars are being waged to conquer the land—which would be the most suitable time to need him—but only after you will have inherited the land and have divided it up [93a2] and have dwelt therein securely. (And all of this was under the providence of Him, blessed be He, and without a king, who thus was not necessary and for whom there was no need whatever.) Then shalt thou say: *I will set a king over me*; and that is being *like as all the nations that are round about me*—that is to say, not by necessity nor for some other end. But when this should happen, He (blessed be He) commanded that they should not cause that king to reign whom they wish, but rather that one whom the Lord their God should choose from among their brethren. This is the commandment in essence and in truth: *Then thou shalt set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose; one from among thy brethren* [Deut. 17:15].¹⁷ That is to say, the king

for whom they shall ask should be chosen by Him (blessed be He) and from among their brethren—not that they were thereby commanded to ask for one.

According to this, the commandment depends on something that was a matter of permission. It is as if it is said: if you wish to do this (even though it is not proper), you must not do it in any other way than this. It is like the verse: *When thou goest forth to war against thine enemies and the Lord thy God hath delivered them, and so on, and thou seest among the captives a woman of goodly form, and thou hast a desire unto her [and wouldest take her to thee to wife; then thou shalt bring her into thy house, and she shall shave her head]*, and so on [Deut. 21:10 ff.]. For it is not commanded that he desire her or take her or have intercourse with her in her impurity, but it is only a matter of permission, though an act of the evil desire. It is only commanded that after that first intercourse, *then thou shalt bring her into thy house*, and so on, as the sages (may their memory be a blessing) have said.¹⁸ It is also like the verse: *When thou shalt beget children and children's children, and ye shall have been long in the land, and shall deal corruptly, and make a graven image, even the likeness of any thing, [and shall do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord thy God to provoke Him to anger]* [Deut. 4:25]. This is not a commandment, but only a matter of permission, though an act of sin. But the end of the passage, *And thou wilt return unto the Lord thy God* [Deut. 4:30], is a positive commandment to return in penitence [for having done that] which was dependent upon a matter of permission. Thus the matter of kingship, similarly, is to be understood in the same way. The request for one was not commanded, but only permitted, though an act of the evil desire; while the stipulation was added that they should only set up that king whom God (blessed be He) had chosen from among their brethren, and in no other way.

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And the speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. And God said unto him: "Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern justice; behold, I have done according to thy word: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there hath been none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee" [I Kings 3:10–12].

[211a1] Even though it be admitted that the wisdom of the prophets varies according to the rank of their prophecy, it would not be proper to understand thereby those [kinds of] knowledge in which Solomon perfected himself—that is to say, the knowledge of governing a household or a city—for all that is far from the concern of prophecy. You see that

Jethro guided Moses in the matter of the administration of justice, until he had taught him the way to appoint captains and how to govern the people. That was because Moses and the rest of the prophets neither busied themselves nor troubled their souls with these low things. Nor did they bother about the knowledge of the things that come-into-being and pass-away, nor about grasping their forms and their essences. For these are not the things that a prophet needs as prophet: neither the knowledge of the natures of the spheres and the stars, nor their number, nor their movements, nor their powers over the things below and how they act upon them, nor the making of talismans—all of which were embraced by Solomon's wisdom. For the knowledge of these things does not lie within the realm of prophecy, nor is it connected with it. Nor [need the prophet] have knowledge of the separate [substances¹⁹] in the same way in which Solomon grasped them; for he, as I have mentioned, apprehended the changes in their actions, and their officiating over the nations and over other things, and the ways in which each of them rules, and the way in which he should serve and labor in order to cause the [divine] emanation²⁰ to descend from it upon his nation. Now none of these things are matters the knowledge of which is needed by the prophet. For his knowledge is only of those things that are peculiar to Him (blessed be He), and the way in which He governs His creatures and, in particular, the Israelite nation, and the way in which the emanation is made to descend from Him (blessed be He) upon the nation by means of the holy sephiroth.²¹ The knowledge of the separate [substances] that is fitting [for a prophet to know extends] only in so far as they are emissaries of [211a2] providence and are connected with the affairs of the Israelite nation and are the means by which prophecy and miracles occur. In all of this, the wisdom of the prophets was according to the rank of their prophecies.

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Therefore, with regard to the wisdom of divine things and the wisdom of the Law, it is proper that we say that the pre-eminence of the prophets was greater than the rank of Solomon, in proportion as their rank in prophecy was greater than his rank. However, in the remaining kinds of science and understanding, Solomon's wisdom was greater than theirs. It was this knowledge that the sages (may their memory be a blessing) had in mind when they said in the Midrash: "He was wiser than any other man, than the first man, than Abraham, than Moses, than Joseph, than the Generation of the Desert, which was a generation of knowledge. Since of this knowledge it was said to him [Solomon]: *Lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there hath been none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee*" [I Kings 3:12].²²

NOTES

1. Or: "Adam."
2. The word means "education" or "initiation"; cf. Gen. 4:17.
3. Reading *be-binyan* rather than *be-inyan*.
4. Reading *hizhir* rather than *zaru*.
5. Cf. Exod. 16:15 ff.; 16:13; Num. 21:16 ff.; Exod. 13:21 and *passim*.
6. Cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 38:6.
7. This was the title of the Hebrew translation of Alfarabi's *Political Regime*. See Part One, Selection 2 (pp. 48 ff.).
8. Reading *ha-nishpatim* rather than *ha-shofetim*.
9. See above, Selection 12, n. 33.
10. Literally: "worship of stars and constellations." Cf. Lam. 1:3 where the last phrase quoted by Abravanel reads: *and because of great servitude*.
11. This translation of the verse follows Abravanel's interpretation.
12. Maimonides, David Kimhi, Nahmanides, Gersonides, Rav Nissim, and Paulus Burgensis.
13. This appears to be a gloss.
14. Abravanel suppresses part of this verse.
15. This appears to be a gloss.
16. Aristotle *Metaphysics* ii. 1. 993^a30 ff.
17. This translation of the verse follows Abravanel's interpretation.
18. Cf. *Babylonian Talmud, Qiddushin*, 21b.
19. According to the medieval Aristotelians, the heavens were moved by a series of intellects that were separated from body and that subsisted in themselves.
20. Correcting a misprint in the text to read *ha-shefa*.
21. According to the teaching of the Cabbalah, sephiroth were the ranks or steps through which the Infinite and Inscrutable made Himself manifest in the world.
22. *Tanhuma*, ch. *Huqqath*.